The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings

A Study in the Limits of 'Formgeschichte'

An Address delivered at the Opening Session of the Congress on 'The Four Gospels in 1957' in the Examination Schools, Oxford, on 16 September, 1957

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THE GOSPEL TRADITION AND ITS BEGINNINGS

EVERY age and every generation of scholars, whatever its particular field of interest, finds fascination in the new results which are achieved and in the new vistas which open out. Though it may be the new and often unexpected conquests of the natural sciences, of technology and of medicine that most readily grip the attention of our own generation, it would be quite a mistake to overlook the fact that comparable achievements are taking place in the fields of the cultural sciences or of theology. Recent advances in the study of the New Testament, and especially of the Gospels, are to be accounted for not least by the accessory disciplines which the science of exegesis has created in these last years. The advances of natural sciences in modern times are due above all to the possibilities of observation and measurement, which have been brought to increased refinement and perfection. But in the study of the New Testament, too, analogous tools have been brought into being, and the methods used given ever greater precision and sensitiveness. It would take us too far from our purpose to consider in detail problems connected with the methods employed in contemporary research. We must be content merely to name some of them—the *lexica* on the language of the New Testament in which an ever increasing body of evidence is collected for the comparative analysis of vocabulary; the collective works in which a many-sided *corpus* of material from the fields of philology, comparative religion and archaeology is assembled; religious documents, papyri and inscriptions, drawn from the world in which primitive Christianity developed. With the help of these

aids it is now possible to engage in analyses and comparisons on a far more extended basis and with much more delicate methods than those in general use hitherto.

These materials enable us to determine the peculiarities of the Gospels and of the individual elements within them, that is, their characteristic usages in words and expressions and forms of style. We can point to similarities and contrasts with texts belonging to the Palestinian or Hellenistic *milieu* in which the New Testament arose. But what is more, we now have in our possession new means of observing differences by improved and more sensitive methods. And, for a picture which conveys light and shade, the differences which separate one text from another are not less important than the agreements.

The inexhaustible significance of the Gospels lies preeminently in the fact that they are our principal source for any account of the life of Jesus. The sparse biographical *data* in the rest of the New Testament writings and in the other early Christian and non-Christian literature, though they may have a certain interest of their own, contribute nothing to our conception of the figure of Christ. The question is often raised whether there is not something unfitting in the fact that our account of the life of Christ should have come down to us not in a single Gospel, but in four, and, what is more, in accounts which differ in some of their details. Should we not have been better served by a single Gospel? As those in quest of a scientific understanding of the Gospels we must reply to such questions, emphatically 'No!' Had this been the case, we should have been seriously perplexed whether we were not in the presence of a literary fiction, or in any case, of a very subjective interpretation of the figure the Gospels depict. It is by reason of the fact that we have several, to be precise four, accounts, that we have been granted a more sharply defined and a more realistic presentation of the person of

Jesus, just as in a stereoscope we obtain a far superior three-dimensional impression from pictures which, when examined side by side without the lens, differ among themselves. These differences between the Gospels naturally create for the student a never-ending problem; but for our assurance of the historicity of Jesus and for our general knowledge of who and what he was, the fact that we have a plurality of four Gospels is a fundamental advantage.

Now what precisely is a Gospel? In the history of religion and of literature alike a Gospel is something wholly unique. It is true that there are distant parallels in the biographies of philosophers or rulers in the Greek literature of the Hellenistic age. This is more particularly so in the case of St. Luke's Gospel, the only one of the four which has been in any degree moulded by literary considerations. On the other hand, there exist certain parallels on Palestinian soil, notably in the Prophetic Books of the Old Testament. Here we have parallels, in matters of outward form, to the preaching of Jesus and to his appearances before his hearers as these are portrayed in the Gospels. But none of these parallels takes us beyond individual items. To the Gospels as a whole there is no known parallel or analogy. The same negative verdict is given by the much discussed and much debated manuscripts from the Dead Sea. It is true that in these new texts we have *data* which assist our understanding of primitive Christianity, its mode of thought and its method of organization, its writings and its vocabulary, for we owe them to a religious movement in Judaism roughly contemporary with Jesus of which we have been hitherto almost wholly unaware. There is also much in the New Testament whose origin was previously sought in distant countries, such as the Johannine symbolism of light and darkness or the ministerial offices in the early Christian communities, which has now been proved to be the native product of Palestine. We also have in the writings of the so-called Sect countless instructive parallels

to the very free way in which primitive Christianity often used and interpreted its quotations from the Old Testament. But how gratified we should have been to have discovered among these texts and fragments a Gospel concerned with the leading figure in this Jewish movement, the so-called 'Teacher of Righteousness'. Yet of such a Gospel we have found no trace. And it is certain that we shall find none.

Now where did our Gospels come from? Obviously it is no sufficient answer to say that they came from their evangelists' pens. It is true that the Gospels in their several forms are the products of writers and theologians who were consciously creative. And to this extent we can reckon either with individual authors or with circles or schools from which one or more of the Gospels came. In the former class we must certainly put Luke, and probably also Mark, both of them Gospels which reflect certain individual characteristics either of their actual authors or of the early tradition from which they came; in the other class perhaps the Gospels of Matthew and John which issued from the formative influence of a school. But what each of the four evangelists has done is to create this or that Gospel, with its characteristic marks, with its individual style, its structure, its theology and its peculiar features in its picture of Jesus. Nevertheless, it is no chance that the titles given to the Gospels in the early Church were: 'The Gospel according to Matthew', 'The Gospel according to Mark', and so on. The evangelists took over their material from the tradition as it lay before them. And though it may be possible to establish points of interdependence in the existing Gospels, none of the four is the religious or literary prototype of the Gospel proper; this must be sought in their pre-history which is not directly accessible to us. It is important to recognize, as is clear from a study of the extant Gospels, that the tradition which lay before our evangelists already had the characteristic *traits* of the class of literature

which we describe as Gospels, and that even if it had not yet reached full definition, it could none the less be already identified as such.

We shall not endeavour to deal here with the origin of the several Gospels in their present form, each with its own characteristics. To do so would be to enter upon four far-reaching and separate fields of study. What we shall attempt to do is, with the aid of the material embodied in our four Gospels, to make clear the pre-history and, as far as we can, the very beginnings of the tradition which finds its written embodiment in the Gospels as they have come down to us. How then did the tradition arise, the tradition of the words and deeds of Jesus? Where shall we find its *Sitz im Leben*?

Nearly forty years ago an important hypothesis was propounded to answer this question. Though at the time it opened up new and fruitful paths of study, and in many respects was of abiding importance, yet in its one-sidedness it became one of those scientific dogmas or myths which have their day and then must gradually be set aside if they are not to impede the further development of investigation. I am here referring, of course, to the solution put forward by the so-called *Formgeschichte*. I need not recount the names of the distinguished scholars associated with this school. They are well known to all professional students of the Gospels, and what concerns us here is the subject more than personalities. The permanent achievement of *formgeschichtliche* investigation is the formal analysis of the individual elements in the Gospel material—of the parables and other words of Jesus, of the accounts of the deeds of Jesus or of happenings in the life of Jesus. These elements were assembled from the tradition which was originally oral, but gradually as time went on, also written down, and then transmitted, as individual fragments or in small groups, until they found their final embodiment in the compilations

known to us as our Gospels. From these studies we now know, for instance, that a parable or an account of a miracle took shape in accordance with definite stylistic laws which can be seen at work in transformations of all items of the same kind. And from our knowledge of these laws we can the better appreciate and judge the peculiarities of the several evangelists. One fact of the first importance which we have learnt is that these elements of tradition have been subjected to certain influences through the Church life of the particular place or *milieu* where they were handed down or received their final written form. Thus by studying details of expression in the pericope on Martha and Mary in Luke 10, it is possible to recognize questions which arose about the position of women in the communities and on the importance of *diakonia*.

But often the exponents of *Formgeschichte* went farther than this. They held that their method enabled them to explain the very beginnings of the Gospel tradition. To the question: 'What was the *Sitz im Leben* of the earliest Gospel tradition?' their answer was 'Preaching' or 'Catechetical Instruction' or 'Controversy'. This was because the first missionaries of the new movement that suddenly arose from belief in the Resurrection, were at once forced to base their preaching on the words of Jesus or on accounts of events in the life of the great Master of Nazareth. This theory presupposed an extraordinary creative capacity in the first Christian generations. A considerable part of the material which is contained in the Gospels was freely invented and then given definite shape. We may take an instance of the way in which the origin of the miracle stories was conceived. When Christianity made its way outside Palestine, into the wide area of the Mediterranean world with its Hellenistic culture, the Christian missionaries found themselves competing with wandering preachers of salvation and miracle-workers of a Graeco-Oriental type. They therefore felt it incumbent on them to present the great-

ness and importance of the Christ whom they proclaimed by the same means as those which their competing miracle-men employed. To this end they invented stories of miraculous acts done by Jesus and thus conveyed to their hearers a striking impression of the power of their Saviour.

I cannot enter here into a detailed critique of these theories. The very existence of such an anonymous creative generation in primitive Christianity presupposes, in view of what we know from the New Testament about the apostles and the other members of the early Christian community, a truly miraculous and incredible factor in the history of the Gospel tradition. And the hypothesis that the miracle-narratives arose on Hellenistic soil can be directly refuted. If we analyse the motives which form the content of the miracle narratives—and we must interpret the miracles as actions with a symbolic purpose which have their clear counterparts in the analogous symbolic acts of the Old Testament prophets—we find that the symbolism of all the miracles which occur and are described in the Gospels rests on a genuine Old Testament and Jewish basis. It certainly did not arise in a Hellenistic *milieu*. It is in just such points that the improved methods of observation of the last few years have succeeded in correcting the false conclusions of earlier students. Indeed, the analysis of the language of symbolism as we find it in the New Testament, offers us far more reliable guidance in determining the *Sitz im Leben* of the primitive tradition.

Another point to be noted is that modern judgements essentially inapplicable to the material under consideration are introduced into these analyses. Scholars have set out from a conception of Jesus which has been constructed *a priori* and have then asked what portions of the Gospel material accord with this conception. They have more or less unconsciously used as the measure of their inquiry what Jesus can or cannot have done, without taking account of the fact that from the very first the tradition understood

the deeds no less than the words of Jesus as something wholly unique which can be understood only in an eschatological setting. But an imperative requirement in the matter of method is that the nature of the investigation, and the criteria by which the material is judged, should be appropriate to the subject of inquiry. And this is something that we can now see more clearly than was possible a few decades ago.

But—to come at last to the main point—Was mission preaching in the earliest years of Christianity one of the principal sources from which the Gospel tradition derived? We must ask the scholars who have reached this conclusion whether they have not allowed themselves to be influenced unawares by picturing in their minds a preacher of our own times. They have in view a conscientious pastor who, unrestrained by any prescribed lectionary, searches out a suitable text for his Sunday sermon. So, they suppose, it must have happened nineteen hundred years ago—except that on many occasions the text could not be found ready-made at all, but had first to be invented. But this picture, surely, is scarcely credible.

Nor, indeed, need we rest content with such general considerations. Scientific study of the material puts in our hands the means of demonstrable proof based on empirical facts. It is now many years since Professor Dodd showed that we can, as it were, distil from the speeches of the apostles in the first chapters of Acts, characteristic elements of the earliest Christian preaching. The content and final challenge of this preaching, whose object was to win its hearers to faith in Jesus Christ and which is hence commonly known as mission preaching, constitutes the so-called 'Kerygma', a compressed summary of the saving work of Christ. Its content was as follows: 'Jesus of Nazareth, the man divinely accredited to you by works of power, prodigies, and signs which God did through him in your midst, was, as you yourselves know, delivered

up by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God; him you have slain by the hands of the Gentiles on the cross. But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by death. This Jesus God raised from the dead, whereof we are witnesses. Being exalted at the right hand of God, and having received the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father, he poured out this which you see and hear. Of a truth shall the whole House of Israel be made aware that God hath made Lord and Christ the very Jesus whom you have crucified. And when they heard this they were pricked to the heart.' We have here typical elements in the primitive Christian preaching: A summary of the Redemptive Act, developed in close relationship to the religious situation of the hearers, and the whole culminating in a missionary reference, and insistence on the imperative need for conversion and faith. As far as the mission preaching to the Jews is concerned, the point of contact was on the one hand demonstration from Old Testament citations that Jesus is in very truth the promised Messiah who now exercises his dominion as the Risen One, and on the other the threat of the final judgement, which all Jews awaited with fear, as directly imminent and the proclamation of salvation in this judgement through faith in the Messiah Jesus. Such was the mission preaching as it was directed to Jews. But in the same Book of Acts we have also pointers, at any rate, to the preaching to the Gentiles, as it was set forth, among others, by Paul, the great Gentile missionary. As a young scholar of Uppsala has shown, it is very probable that Paul's so-called Areopagus speech at Athens represents an abbreviated and schematized, yet none the less typical, example of such a sermon to the Gentiles in Pauline modes of thought. And here again we find direct contact made with the religious presuppositions of the hearers, though in this case they were different: 'For as I passed along and observed the

objects of your worship I found also an altar with this inscription: "To an Unknown God". What therefore ye worship in ignorance, this set I forth unto you. The God that made the world and all things therein, he, being Lord of Heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands' (*Acts* 17. 22–24). And then at the end, with the demand for conversion, we have a reference to precisely the preaching of Jesus Christ: 'But now he commandeth men that they should everywhere repent, inasmuch as he hath appointed a day in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he hath ordained, whereof he hath given assurance unto all men in that he hath raised him from the dead' (17. 30 f.). The Belgian scholar, Professor Cerfaux, has accurately observed how Paul in his earlier letters, where he sets out from the Jewish situation, makes the fear of the approaching judgement the principal point of contact with his hearers in his mission preaching, whereas in his later letters he has chiefly in the foreground the fear of death which was the question of existential import in the Hellenistic world that knew little of the threat of judgement.

Thus, with the help of Acts and of certain echoes in the New Testament epistles, we can construct notions of the early Christian missionary preaching to Jews and Gentiles alike. And, as we have already said, we have fragments of kerygmatic formulae about the saving work of Christ. But of anything which recalls the materials from which our Gospels were constructed we have, alas! not the least trace. It is true that claims have sometimes been made to have recovered them. For instance, there is a passage about Jesus put into the mouth of Peter in Acts 10 where we read: 'Jesus Christ is Lord of all. You yourselves know what took place throughout Judaea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached. You know of Jesus of Nazareth, whom God anointed with the Holy Ghost and power, who went about doing good and healing all

that were oppressed of the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. Him they brought to the gallows and slew' (*Acts* 10. 36–39). May not this summary of the life and death of Jesus be conceived as an epitome, so to speak, of the Gospel tradition? And could not the latter have been expanded from such rudiments into its later fulness? Along these lines the course of development is often still conceived. But is not such a solution another hypothetical dogma or myth? *Data* are wholly wanting to support such a process of expansion and there is certainly nothing in our Gospels, especially if we compare the three Synoptics with the Fourth Gospel, which gives the slightest basis for such an hypothesis. Here we must refrain from adducing further considerations, and summarize our conclusion: 'Mission preaching was not the *Sitz im Leben* of the Gospel tradition'.

Side by side with mission preaching the announcement of the Gospel went on within the Christian communities. On the one hand there was the instruction of catechumens, on the other edification of the community's members. This preaching in the framework of the communities took place not so much through appeal to the emotions as by instruction in matters of fact and in the Christian way of living. This teaching would have included both Christological and other theological matters as well as ethical admonitions, this last in the form of the so-called 'parainesis'. In this connexion we may recall, for instance, the catalogues of virtues and vices, and also the *Haustafeln*. Nor are we here wholly dependent on speculation. From certain of the New Testament Epistles—especially the non-Pauline ones—we can see to some extent what the subject-matter of such preaching was. For there can be no doubt that these epistles were composed and despatched to be read in the communities as formal utterances, that is, as sermons. And while it is certain that few unwritten sermons, in the matter

either of content or form, could be compared with the letters of St. Paul, yet in respect of the species and kind of utterance, we can assuredly here build on analogies.

We have now to ask: 'Can we find in this preaching within the framework of the communities the primitive Gospel tradition?' Here, too, scholars have sought to draw positive conclusions. Thus in 1 Corinthians 7. 10 f. St. Paul expressly appeals to Jesus' teaching on marriage: 'But to the married I give charge—yea not I, but the Lord—That the wife depart not from her husband. But and if she depart let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband: and that the husband leave not his wife'. Doubtless the apostle is appealing here to the words of Jesus on marriage transmitted, e.g. in Mark 10. The situation is still clearer in the Epistle of James, where at almost every step we meet with allusions to parainetic sayings of Jesus. Have we not a proof here that in any case the sayings of Jesus with an ethical import were transmitted, if indeed they were not created, in connexion with the early Christian parainesis? Yet this is another conclusion which I find it hard to accept for the following reasons, mainly based on considerations issuing from recent studies carried out in Uppsala.

For if we suppose the existence of such an interrelation between early Christian community preaching and Gospel tradition, then it remains inexplicable that while in the Christological and theological parts of the New Testament Epistles we have countless allusions to the sayings of Jesus (though not to the narrative material of the Gospels), we have no express citations of his words. There can be only one explanation of this strange fact, namely, that the primitive Christian letter-writers, and among them Paul, took express pains to avoid citing the sayings of Jesus in the context of their original utterance. Their method, that is, was directly the opposite of that of preachers of our own day. The sayings of Jesus, and hence the tradition about

Jesus, were presumed to be already known, but this tradition was not cited in its verbal form.

Two examples will illustrate this point. Let us compare the Epistle of James 2. 5: 'Hearken, my beloved brethren. Did not God choose them that are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the Kingdom?' with Matthew 5. 3 and 5. 5: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. . . . Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.' And again the saying in the Epistle of James 1. 25: 'But he that looketh into the perfect law of liberty and so continueth therein, being not a hearer that forgetteth, but a doer that worketh, this man shall be blessed in his doing,' has its counterpart in John 13. 17: 'If ye know these things, blessed are ye if ye do them'. Of the eight Matthaean beatitudes, four are to be found in the Epistle of James and in the same order, a fact, by the way, which cannot be accidental. In any case the author of this epistle presupposes parts of the Sermon on the Mount as clearly well known to his readers. Indeed, we can establish that the verbal form of the sayings of Jesus which James presupposes is that of Matthew and not of Luke.

From the analysis of Paul's epistles there is much that might be adduced on this subject, though here we must confine ourselves to a few brief remarks. It is clear that Paul was acquainted with the tradition of the sayings of Jesus, and at many points in his epistles makes express allusion to sayings of his. This means in turn that Paul could presuppose these sayings as known to his readers. The words in Romans 12. 14: 'Bless them that persecute you, bless and curse not' are simply a paraphrase of the saying of Jesus: 'Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors' (*Matt.* 5. 44). Hence scholars have concluded—and certainly correctly—that such a section as Romans 14. 13 ff. records parainetic words of Jesus and that the Epistles to the Thessalonians have their basis in apocalyptic teaching in the Synoptic tradition.

Once we have perceived this, very wide vistas open up. It is one of the characteristic *traits* of the New Testament that the Messianic title, 'Son of Man', is virtually confined to the Gospels. Though it must certainly have been known to the authors of the New Testament Epistles, they could not bring themselves to use it. And this, too, cannot be an accident. On the other hand, there are essential elements of the Pauline Christology which can be explained as the interpretation or 'theologization' of the Son-of-Man-sayings of Jesus.

We will again epitomize the negative result of our investigations up to this point: The *Sitz im Leben* and the original source of the Gospel tradition was neither mission preaching nor the communal instruction of the primitive Church.

It is now high time to enter upon the positive aspects of our problem. And only one possible answer remains, even if it demands an extended analysis, namely: The Gospel tradition belongs to a category which is *sui generis* and, to put the matter concisely, it has its own *Sitz im Leben*. It is a conclusion which has been forcing itself upon us with ever growing insistence. It is true that even when we have recognized this, we are still at the outset of our task. Yet to have seen this much enables us to break through the fetters which arise from a one-sided application of the *formgeschichtliche* method.

It is not incompatible with insistence on the unique character of the primitive Christian message, and hence of the Gospel tradition, to draw attention to analogies from the *milieu* in which this Gospel tradition arose. Strangely, these have been insufficiently heeded hitherto. Preaching and instruction were commonplaces alike in Palestinian Judaism and in the Jewish Diaspora of the Mediterranean world, even though their character was far less intense than in the early Church. But no real student of Judaism in the

Hellenistic age would for one moment imagine that these authoritative or 'holy' words had their *Sitz im Leben* in preaching or in instruction of the community or in controversy with the surrounding world.

As regards the writings of the Old Testament, their literary content was already fixed at this period. Hence in this case there could be no question of any oral tradition. But side by side with the text of the Old Testament there existed an extensive and important complex of tradition. This was the so-called 'Sayings of the Fathers', that comprehensive exposition and elaboration of the Law which was carefully handed on from generation to generation and finally found its literary embodiment in the Mishnah *c.* A.D. 200. In this case we have indeed an authoritative 'holy' tradition which it was sought ultimately to derive from the revelation of Jahweh to Moses on Mount Sinai.

As regards the nature of this Jewish tradition and its transmission, we are, as it happens, relatively well informed. But what justifies us in drawing from it a number of conclusions relating to primitive Christianity is the fact that the terminology used of the Jewish process of tradition reappears in the New Testament. It appears here, indeed, in Greek translation, but it is easily recognizable. But we must add at the outset—to guard ourselves from conveying the misleading impression of putting the Gospel tradition on the same level as the Jewish interpretation of the Law—that we are here concerned only with the formal side of the process of tradition and not directly with its content as such.

Παραλαμβάνειν, 'take over', Heb. *qibbēl*, denotes the imprinting of a tradition of doctrine with which one had been entrusted, while παραδιδόναι, 'hand over', Heb. *māsar*, is used of its commitment to a particular pupil. The situation as here conceived is not the vague diffusion of narratives, sagas, or anecdotes, as we find it in folk-lore, but the rigidly controlled transmission of matter from one who has

the mastery of it to another who has been specially chosen to learn it. The bearer of the tradition and the teacher (*rabbi*) watched over its memorizing by his approved pupils (*talmīd*) and what was passed on in this way was, in the matter both of content and form, a fixed body of material. Especially was this so as regards the Halachic material of the Mishnah tradition, that is, as regards its specially important, 'holy', constituent. The ideal pupil was one who never lost one iota of the tradition. That variations in the material took place in the process of tradition for psychological reasons is obvious, and this circumstance enables us to investigate the development of the tradition from another angle. For, however great its receptive capacities, even an Oriental mind is not a tape-recorder.

From the circumstance that the Rabbinic tradition was strictly controlled and its transmission regulated by firmly established laws—a fact bound up with the conception of the transmitted material as holy Word—it follows that the oral tradition was esoteric, and this not in the sense that it was treasured as a dark secret, but that it was not entrusted to everyone nor was it at everyone's disposal to use as he wished. There were, however, certain parts of the Jewish tradition (but to these the Halachic material did not belong) which were so esoteric that they were committed with solemn ceremonies only to particular specially mature pupils.

All this means, therefore, that in New Testament times the specifically Jewish tradition, at any rate, was not possessed and shaped by an unlimited and undefined anonymous multitude. The people or the synagogue community were, of course, instructed in the Scriptures and in the tradition of the Law, but such instruction never made a community as such bearers of the tradition. On the contrary, those who performed this task were an exactly defined group within the community.

From this point we can now explain, or at least throw

light on, the New Testament conception of παράδοσις, 'tradition'. For it has been one of the defects of the *formgeschichtliche* method, as it has been employed hitherto, that all too little notice has been taken of the relevant analogies in the Palestinian conception of tradition.

Let us, then, return to the New Testament. There is a characteristic passage in Paul which is relevant in this connexion. He writes: 'Finally, brethren, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus that as ye received of us [i.e. the tradition] how ye ought to walk and to please God, even as ye do walk, that ye abound more and more' (1 *Thess.* 4. 1). Here the apostle is using the terminology to which we have already referred: the community has received a tradition through his mediation. But what sort of a tradition? Examination of the use of similar expressions elsewhere in Paul justifies us in assuming that they were words of Jesus about the nature of discipleship and the mode of life to be followed by the brethren.

To be brief, I will merely state one of the conclusions which follow from a large body of evidence. Paul was himself the bearer of the Gospel tradition, that is, he carefully took it over and gave it shape. In the long autobiographical passage at the beginning of the Epistle to the Galatians he says that he spent three years in Arabia after his conversion and then went to Jerusalem and visited Peter with whom he stayed fifteen days. It is reasonable to conclude that his chief concern in these weeks was not theological discussions or ecclesiastical projects but something which was a precondition of the fulfilment of his apostolic work, namely that Peter should test whether he, Paul, during his term of preparation, had really made the tradition of the words and deeds of Jesus his own, in the form, that is, which these words and deeds had assumed by that date. For in the Pauline Epistles we see how the apostle appealed on occasion to an overmastering tradition, and this can have been none other than the Gospel tradition in

its own individuality. If Paul, like the other writers of the New Testament Epistles, usually refrains from expressly quoting this tradition—and this reticence, of which we still have to speak, is certainly intentional—yet in certain specially important places he makes it clear that he has access to the verbal tradition, e.g. in the passage where he solemnly introduces as a quotation the Words of Institution at the Last Supper (1 *Cor.* 11. 23–25). The way in which Paul handles such a quotation shows that the words of the tradition were *sui generis* and did not, in fact, normally find a place in a letter.

Now just because Paul was in a special way the bearer of the tradition of the words and deeds of Jesus, he could consider himself as on a level with the other apostles, and especially with the Twelve. For the chief obligations of the apostles included not only preaching and the oversight of the communities, but also the safe-keeping and committal to trustworthy persons of the words and deeds of Jesus, that is of the Gospel tradition. We can see this especially clearly from certain passages in the Lucan writings. In Acts 6 the activity of the apostles is described with some exactness: 'It is not meet that we should forsake the Word of God and serve tables' (6. 2). Hence seven collaborators were selected for the latter task, while the apostles devoted themselves to prayer and the 'service' (διακονία) of the 'Word'. Wherein this service consisted, and that it was not regarded as being primarily preaching, follows from the phrase here employed: λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ, the 'Word of God'. We may also recall the Prologue to St. Luke's Gospel, which comes from the same writer as Acts. Here we read of the events of the life of Jesus, 'how they have been transmitted to us [we may note the *terminus technicus*] by the original eye-witnesses and ministers (ὑπηρέται) of the Word' (*Lk.* 1. 2). The words and deeds of Jesus are a holy Word, comparable with that of the Old Testament, and the handing down of this precious material

is entrusted to special persons. And just for this reason it was so important, when the twelfth place in the circle of the disciples had become vacant through the fall and death of Judas Iscariot and had to be filled again, to find someone who—as we read—'belongs to the people who have companied with us [i.e. with the Twelve] all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and went out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day that he was received up from among us. He must with us be a witness of the Resurrection' (*Acts* 1. 21 f.). Hence to be an apostle or witness of the Resurrection it was not sufficient to have met the Risen Christ, but that person had to possess such a living impression of the life and work of Jesus as to make him qualified to transmit the holy tradition of the words and deeds of Jesus.

Now can we find in the most primitive Christianity any *Sitz im Leben* of such a special 'holy' tradition about Jesus? We are helped in answering this question if we consider the literary genus of this tradition which precedes the Gospels in their definitive written form. Comparison with the style of the Prophetic discourses of the Old Testament on the one hand and with the Rabbinic material on the other, suggests that the tradition was recited; and, since the tradition was not esoteric in the narrower sense, that it was recited not exclusively to hearers who were destined to become future transmitters of the tradition. But as soon as ever one reflects on the character of this Christian tradition as holy word, as the Word of God and as something parallel to the holy writings of the Old Testament, the very smallest knowledge of the Palestinian *milieu* forces the conclusion that the words and deeds of Jesus were not just improvised, that there was no question of freely narrating or of inventing, even when the speaker was possessed by the Spirit. On the contrary, the strict laws relating to holy tradition will have prevailed from the outset and determined both what was uttered and what was

transmitted, in spite of the fact that in points of detail variations could not but appear and, indeed, did appear.

But where, we may ask, was this traditional material uttered or recited? Here too we can give the answer. It would evidently have been in the assemblies of the community. We must again picture in our minds analogies drawn from the use of the sacred Books of the Old Testament in Judaism. It is significant that the original New Testament designation for the Gospel tradition was not εὐαγγέλιον—this word stands for its missionary appeal—but λόγος, ῥῆμα and then λόγος θεοῦ—all terms which correspond with the names current in Judaism for Holy Scripture. The words of Jesus and the reports of his deeds and his life, although originally transmitted by word of mouth, were conceived from a very early date to be the New Torah, and hence as the Word of God of the new, eschatological covenant.

Now we know from the accounts in Acts that the original Jerusalem community took part in the services in the Temple and in the synagogues, and they did so, we may conclude, for the sake of the prayers and Bible readings. But besides this public worship the community which believed in the Risen Lord gathered in a closer circle—first in the Upper Room and soon also in private houses—for the breaking of bread, for prayer and for instruction by the apostles, διδαχὴ τῶν ἀποστόλων, which took place in the presence of the whole community (*Acts* 2. 42). In view of such participation in the Jewish worship, it is natural to regard the apostles' instruction as being in the first place the recounting of the words and deeds of Jesus, as the complement to the sacred Word of the Old Testament which the community had already heard. Indeed, it would have been not only its complement but also its fulfilment. As in the synagogue, exposition followed the recitation and of this exposition we have some indications in the New Testament epistles.

Here we have the reason why the words and deeds of Jesus were probably never quoted verbally in the missionary preaching and only on rare occasions in the community instruction. The tradition which was recited was holy and hence, in contrast to present-day practice, was not readily mentioned by word of mouth. Mission preaching, indeed, pointed and led to it. The instruction in the community presupposed it and linked itself up with it. But in its verbal form and in its *Sitz im Leben* in the community it was *sui generis*.

From this point we can gain light on the transmission of the tradition in the early Church and on the process of its literary fixation. In view of the fact that the recitation of the tradition about Jesus as the sacred Word of the New Covenant was an essential constituent in Christian public worship, it is certain that the need for authorized transmitters of this tradition became greater as the Christian Church itself grew and its communities increased in number. This need must have contributed fundamentally to the growth of the Christian ministry. It was the same set of circumstances which, again in analogy with the Old Testament, led to the written fixation of the text at a comparatively early date. In this process it was the words of Jesus which were brought together first, just as in Judaism special importance was attached to the Sayings of the Fathers. The earliest step away from the original exclusiveness of the holy tradition is the Gospel of Luke which already places the words and deeds of Jesus in a literary and apologetic framework.

But fully to understand the origin of the Gospel tradition we must go back further still. How can we explain the fact that in the first age of the Church the tradition about Jesus already possessed its special character as holy Word? The answer must be: That this tradition, *qua* tradition, was derived from none other than Jesus. Hence our thesis is that the beginning of the Gospel tradition lies with Jesus himself.

In the Gospels we are shown very clearly that Jesus was a teacher, and especially in his relation to his disciples. This means more than his mere preaching in their presence. He gave them instruction and in this we are reminded, *mutatis mutandis*, of the method of the Jewish rabbi. And this implies that Jesus made his disciples, and above all the Twelve, learn, and furthermore that he made them learn by heart.

And, if we view the matter from the other side, it is also evident that some of the main portions of Jesus' sayings in the Gospels are formulated so as to be suited to transmission and memorization. Here too we can make comparisons with the stylistic laws of the sacred tradition of the Jews, though we must not overlook the differences. Of the Lord's Prayer it was expressly said that Jesus taught his disciples this (*Lk.* 11. 1 f.; cf. *Matt.* 6. 9). But, apart from this, many of the words of Jesus are in such a form that not only is it possible to hear the echoes of the Aramaic original, but also to deduce that they were carefully formulated so as to be apt for transmission. We may take the case of the Parable of the Building of the House with which the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew concludes:

'Everyone who hears my words and doeth them
is like a wise man
who built his house upon the rock
'And the rain came down and the floods came and the storms blew
and they fell against that house
and it fell not
for it was built upon the rock.
'And everyone that heareth these my words and doeth them not
is like a foolish man
who built his house upon the sand

'And the rain came down and the floods came and the storms blew
and they beat against that house
and it fell
and its fall was great' (*Matt.* 7. 24–27).

In accord with this is the fact that even after the translation of the tradition into Greek, certain words of Jesus were preserved in their original Aramaic form, as for instance *Talitha qūm*, 'Young maid, Arise', in the narrative of the awakening of Jairus' daughter (*Mark* 5. 41). It is not here a case of the use of magical words in acts of healing in the primitive community. What we have are formulae which were treasured in the memory for the sake of Jesus, and this because they came from him and not for any miraculous power they might possess.

The preaching of Jesus before the Palestinian crowds was revelation, the announcement of a Divine secret, μυστήριον. We must think of the disciples, in their relation to this message, as sitting at Jesus' feet, partly in order to hear once again the words and to get to know them by heart, partly that they might be instructed in their meaning as, e.g. (in the matter of method), in Mark 4. 11: 'When they were alone those that were around him with the Twelve asked him about the Parables'. In this way they were taught the destiny of the Son of Man and the conditions of following after him, matters which in Jesus' lifetime were intended for a more esoteric and narrower circle of disciples.

In modern times such a picture of the origins of the Gospel tradition as the following is often met with: The preaching of Jesus, who was possessed by the prophetic Spirit, was free and without restraint. Some of this preaching survived with more or less verbal accuracy in the memories of his hearers. Besides, it was the custom in the primitive Church to preach freely and without restraint, and in this process sayings and narratives were created and

invented. And then from this extensive body of material the evangelists or their predecessors made a well-considered selection. But this romantic picture has no relation to reality. On the contrary, it is probable both that from Jesus' own days the material was far more strictly limited and also that it was handed down in a far more rigid and fixed form. One indication of this is the very limited extent of the extra-canonical tradition of Jesus. It is evident that Jesus did not preach indiscriminately nor continually, but that he imposed certain limitations on his preaching as he did in the case of his miracles. And what was essential to his message he taught his disciples, that is, he made them learn it by heart. Doubtless there are small parts of it which have fallen by the way, but we may well ask whether the bulk of it is not preserved in our Gospels. Such a statement as John 21. 25 is clearly an exaggeration.

Along this road we can advance still farther. We can inquire whether the tradition of Jesus' deeds cannot also be traced back in its beginnings to Jesus himself. Naturally this cannot apply to the Passion narratives, which form a unit apart, with their own problems. But there are indications in connexion, e.g., with the Miracles of the Feeding (*Mk.* 8. 19–21) which lead to the conclusion that Jesus also spoke with his disciples about deeds and their significance. We may also compare the reply to the Baptist on the subject of miracles (*Matt.* 11. 4 f.). And it is probable that the kernel of the narratives on the Baptism and the Temptation are to be derived from Jesus' teaching in the circle of his disciples.

The account of the anointing at Bethany (*Mk.* 14. 3–9) concludes with a saying of Jesus about the woman with the alabaster vessel and her gracious act: 'Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever the gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, that also which this woman hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her'. This remark at the end of the narrative is generally regarded as a secondary

addition from the days of the primitive Church. But the question arises whether the thought expressed in the passage is necessarily incompatible with the situation and the intention of Jesus, either in the actual setting here given to it or in some other of a similar kind. That Jesus reckoned with an intervening epoch between his death and the parousia, that is, with the epoch of the Church, appears to me a necessary consequence of the institution of the Lord's Supper. The sacrament is intended as a symbolic action which derives its meaning from its relation to the Church. But is it possible to conceive of any such action in the intention of Jesus without the complement of the Word? Hence we must seriously ask whether Jesus did not reckon with the announcement of the Good News in the epoch of the Church, and whether he did not, in view of this preaching, transmit to his disciples a λόγος whose outlines were already defined. There is the duality of word and action both with Jesus and in the Church. Between the deeds of Jesus and the sacramental symbolic action of the Church there exists an ascertainable connexion. Should not a like connexion also exist between the preaching of Jesus and the tradition of the words and deeds of Jesus in the Church? I therefore make bold to conjecture that Jesus reckoned with what we may call the recital of the Gospel tradition in the epoch between his death and the parousia.

In asserting this we are naturally not saying either that the Gospel tradition existed from the very first in its settled form as we find it in the Synoptic tradition, or that it can be traced back to Jesus in its definitive shape. It is self-evident that the moulding of the tradition—e.g. by the collecting and grouping of individual pericopes, through its transformations and also through its additions—came about gradually in the life of the primitive Church. The essential point is that the outlines, that is, the beginnings of the proper genus of the tradition of the words and deeds of Jesus, were memorized and recited as holy Word. We

should be inclined to trace these outlines back to Jesus' activity as a teacher in the circle of his disciples. Another consequence of such considerations is that we reach a more positive attitude to the question whether the essential constituents of the Christology and ethics, as we now have them in the *data* of the tradition, may not go back to Jesus himself.

Along these lines we also reach vantage points from which to judge of the Johannine tradition. It is clear that the development of the material in this Gospel took place in accordance with rules which in some ways differed from those which controlled the Synoptic material. It is a characteristic of the Johannine mode of presentation that the words and deeds of Jesus are, so to speak, commented on, that they became the object of 'meditations'. Here too I should incline to the view that the Gospel of John rests on an independent line of tradition, which had its original starting point in the activity of Jesus, and which then ran parallel with the Synoptic line of tradition. And here the starting point is to be found in the discourses and 'meditations' of Jesus in the circle of his disciples, such as certainly took place side by side with the instruction of the disciples proper, with its more rigid forms. Such a view is not incompatible with this line of tradition having also undergone a long and complex development.

But in the last resort the solution given to the whole problem of the Gospel tradition depends on the inquirer's attitude to the problem of the Messianic self-consciousness. Here again we find that this is the central question for the interpretation of the New Testament and the point at which the ways divide.

If we take in all seriousness the position that Jesus regarded himself as the Messiah and that as a result of this he also drew the consequences of a fully developed Messianic system of ideas, then we need not be surprised if Jesus was conscious of himself as the bearer of revelation,

as the bringer of the new law and as a teacher. Granted the Messianic consciousness, then the circle of the disciples formed the kernel of the corresponding eschatological community. In view of the Old Testament background and the Messianic hopes of the Jews, we can legitimately assume that Jesus entrusted to his disciples, and hence to the eschatological People of God, an already formulated holy Word for it to transmit, and that this was the starting point of a tradition. For if we assume the Messianic consciousness, then Jesus must also have spoken about the significance of his person and the rules for the conduct of life in the Messianic community. In this particular matter the writings from the Dead Sea at least point the way.

In modern handbooks on the theology of the New Testament the appearance and proclamation of Jesus are often treated as prolegomena. So regarded, Jesus of Nazareth belongs to the history of later Judaism. Christianity—that is, faith in Jesus as Messiah and Redeemer—first arose in the primitive community after the Resurrection and hence is to be treated as a subject separate from the preaching of Jesus. Over against this view, the considerations which have just been urged lead us back to the 'classical' method of interpretation. The belief in Christ is to be found already in the words and deeds of Jesus just because Jesus regarded himself as the Messiah. The faith of the primitive Church had its origin in what Jesus proclaimed and set forth in symbolic form. One of the preconditions of this has already been established: It was owing to the tradition of the deeds and words of Jesus which began from Jesus himself that the primitive Church had the basis for its faith. This gives us a profitable starting point from which to compare our four Gospels, both among themselves and also with the rest of the New Testament writings, as the expression of the faith of the first Christian generations.

When we reckon with the fact that Jesus is the founder

of the Gospel tradition, both as to its essence and its original starting point, we arrive naturally at a synthesis which is again classical and see in the 'Gospel of Jesus Christ' (εὐαγγέλιον Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ; cf. *Mk.* 1. 1) both the Good News brought by Jesus Christ (subjective genitive) and the Good News about Jesus Christ (objective genitive). By simply tracing their descent we find the two lines here united in the person and work of Jesus.

We have here attempted to give an answer to the question as to the origin of the Gospel tradition. We must seek its origin ultimately in Jesus and his Messianic self-consciousness. Jesus is not only the object of a later faith, which on its side gave rise to the growth of oral and also written tradition, but, as Messiah and teacher, Jesus is the object and subject of a tradition of authoritative and holy words which he himself created and entrusted to his disciples for its later transmission in the epoch between his death and the parousia.